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AUTHOR Clagett, Craig A.
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at Prince George's Community College (PGCC) to examine student retention in two ways. First, the percentage of fall 1987 students who returned for classes the following spring was calculated for several student groups. Second, students entering PGCC for the first time in 1980 were tracked in terms of attendance and degree completion through spring 1988. Study findings included the following: (1) the overall fall 1987-spring 1988 retention rate was 59%, with full-time students returning at a rate of 78% compared to a part-time student return rate of 52%; (2) a telephone survey of fall 1987 students who did not return in spring 1988 found that "employment demands" was the most common reason for dropping out; (3) the programs with the highest return rates were Nursing, Legal Secretary, and Hospital Services Management; (4) 9 of the 12 programs with high retention rates were occupational, rather than transfer oriented; (5) fall-to-spring retention rates remained fairly stable over the past 3 years; (6) graduates of the class of 1987 took an average of nearly five years to earn their "two-year" degree; (7) over 25% of the 3,935 students who entered PGCC for the first time in fall 1980 attended only that one semester; (8) 31% of the fall 1980 entrants attended at least one more term, but had interruptions in their PGCC attendance; and (9) 488 of the original group earned an associate degree by the end of the spring 1988 semester. (AYC)

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STUDENT RETENTION
AT
PRINCE GEORGE'S COMMUNITY COLLEGE

PRINCE GEORGE'S
COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Office of Institutional Research and Analysis

Research Brief RB89-6
October 1988

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PRINCE GEORGE'S COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Office of Institutional Research and Analysis

STUDENT RETENTION
Research Brief RB89-6

Introduction

Student retention term-to-term and persistence through achievement of educational goals are widely used measures of student performance. The Maryland Higher Education Reorganization law specifically mentions graduation and retention rates as required components of institutional accountability reports. Such measures must be applied with care to community colleges, a majority of whose students often have no intention of earning a degree at the community college. For example, a survey of first-time students in fall 1987 found only 46 percent intending to earn the A.A. degree at PGCC. Thirty-five percent planned to transfer to a four-year school without earning an award from the community college. The remaining students were pursuing a certificate or just taking selected courses.

Methodology

Student retention was examined in two ways. First, the percentage of fall students who return for classes the following spring has been calculated for several student groups. This fall-to-spring retention analysis has been done for the past three academic years; highlights of these studies are presented below. The second approach to studying student retention was a longitudinal analysis of students entering college for the first time in fall 1980. The PGCC attendance and degree completion of these fall 1980 entrants was tracked through spring 1988, a total of eight years or 16 regular semesters.

The fall-to-spring retention rates reflect spring returnees as a percentage of the official, end-of-semester fall enrollment, less December graduates. The base for calculating the retention rate is thus all fall students enrolled on official statistical dates, less those who graduated after the fall semester. Fall-to-spring retention is examined for several demographic groups, sorted by variables on the student information system. The limitations of this analysis must be recognized; student decisions to continue or not are the product of a complex interplay among a multitude of factors. Many variables plausibly related to retention--such as academic background, student motivation, peer or family support--were not available for analysis. Multivariate studies in the literature suggest that demographic variables are not significantly related to retention and attrition when academic background is controlled for. Since the college does not require high school transcripts from

applicants, several useful variables (high school rank, grade point average, courses in math and English) were not available for analysis. The results reported below are limited to presenting the retention rates for various student groups. Looking at one or two variables at a time, this method does not lend itself to explanations for retention behavior. It is likely that several of the variables investigated are correlated with each other and that other important variables have been left out. Drawing any conclusions about the contributions of each variable to the student decision to continue would be inappropriate. Multivariate analyses such as multiple regression or discriminant analysis would be required to ascertain the relative contribution of each variable in explaining student retention.

Most Recent Outcomes Indicators

The overall fall 1987-spring 1988 retention rate was 59 percent. Students attending full-time in fall 1987 were more likely to return (78 percent) than part-timers (52 percent). Students with a declared major were more likely to continue their studies than those not pursuing a specific program:

Fall 1987 - Spring 1988 Retention Rates

	Enrolled Fall 87	Returned Spring 88	Retention Rate
Total	12,736	7,514	59%
Full-time	3,506	2,734	78%
Part-time	9,230	4,780	52%
Matriculated	10,636	6,723	63%
Nonmatriculated	2,100	791	38%
Female	7,791	4,619	59%
Male	4,945	2,895	59%
Asian	518	340	66%
Black	5,353	3,049	57%
Hispanic	222	137	62%
Native American	57	31	54%
White	6,586	3,957	60%
Under age 21	4,153	2,905	70%
21 - 25	2,720	1,557	57%
26 - 35	3,319	1,711	52%
36 - 60	2,161	1,101	51%
Over age 60	371	235	63%

(Birthdate missing for 12 students)

Fifty-eight percent of the students attending college for the first time in fall 1987 returned in spring 1988. In contrast, 68 percent of the students who had been continuing their studies at PGCC in fall 1987 were retained another semester in spring 1988. A telephone survey of fall 1987 entrants who did not return in spring 1988 found employment demands the most commonly cited reason (mentioned by 17 percent). Other reasons for not returning in spring 1988 were financial (cited by 13 percent), insufficient time (9 percent), and academic problems (8 percent). Overall, 85 percent of the fall 1987 students who failed to return in spring 1988 said they planned to return to PGCC to resume their studies.

Fall-to-spring retention rates varied by program. Twelve programs (counting program petitioners separately) with at least 25 identified majors in fall 1987 had retention rates more than 10 percentage points above the college average. Five were in health technology, with Nursing registering the highest retention rate collegewide, 86 percent. Unmatriculated students had the lowest fall-to-spring retention, 38 percent. Three certificate programs had the lowest retention rates:

Fall 1987 - Spring 1988 Retention Rates by Student Program
Programs with at least 25 Majors in Fall 1987

High Retention Rates	Enrolled Fall 87	Returned	Low Retention Rates	Enrolled Fall 87	Returned
Nursing	232	86%	(Unmatric.)	2,100	38%
Legal Secretary	25	80%	Word Proc. Cert.	25	40%
Hosp. Serv. Mgt.	68	79%	Sm. Bus. Mgt. Ct.	27	44%
Arch. Draft. Cert.	25	76%	Comp. Prog. Cert.	161	47%
Info. Sys. pet.	32	75%			
Physical Ed.	41	73%			
Nursing pet.	267	72%			
Engineering	291	71%			
Radiography pet.	28	71%			
Respiratory Care	28	71%			
Paralegal	217	70%			
Medical Records	54	70%			

Nine of the 12 programs with high retention rates were occupational, rather than transfer oriented. Students not identified with a program had the lowest retention rate. While multivariate analysis would be necessary before attempting to "explain" student retention behavior, the data do suggest that a student's commitment to full-time attendance and degree program matriculation is associated with term-to-term persistence.

Time Series and Peer College Comparisons

Fall-to-spring retention analyses completed over the past three academic years have found rates fairly stable. Full-time, degree-seeking students had above-average retention all three years. Asian students have consistently had higher retention rates than other ethnic groups:

Trends in Fall-to-spring Retention,
by Gender and Race, 1985-88

	F85-S86	F86-S87	F87-S88
Male Students			
Asian	70%	63%	64%
Black	57	57	56
Hispanic	59	60	60
White	61	62	60
Female Students			
Asian	66%	69%	68%
Black	59	58	58
Hispanic	59	54	63
White	60	61	60
Collegewide	60%	60%	59%

Similar fall-to-spring retention analyses were not readily available for PGCC peer colleges. However, fall-to-fall retention patterns were calculated using the enrollment data submitted as part of the routine state reporting process. PGCC's fall-to-fall retention for 1986-87 was slightly higher than that at peer colleges:

Fall 1987 Enrollment of Fall 1986 Community College Students

	Retained	Transferred	Left Md. System
Prince George's	41%	9%	50%
Anne Arundel	40%	7%	52%
Catonsville	39%	9%	52%
Essex	40%	8%	52%
Montgomery (Rockville)	38%	12%	50%

Fall 1980 Longitudinal Student Persistence Study

Graduates of the PGCC Class of 1987 took an average of nearly five years to earn their "two-year" degree. The average graduate's tenure at PGCC has increased over the past decade; graduates in 1977 had taken an average of 3.7 years to earn their award. The share of students attending part-time increased from two-thirds to nearly three-fourths during this time. Nearly a third of the college's students discontinue their studies at some point, only to return to PGCC at a later time. To better understand student attendance patterns, the institutional research office has begun a series of longitudinal student persistence studies, starting with the fall 1980 entering class.

A total of 3,935 students began their college careers at PGCC in fall 1980. Their attendance at PGCC was tracked over an eight-year period covering 16 regular semesters (summer sessions were excluded) ending in spring 1988. The analysis was hampered by a lack of reliable student goal information; while a substantial proportion most likely was not seeking a degree from PGCC, information was not available for identifying degree from non-degree-seeking students. Thus the analysis that follows includes all students, regardless of their goal in attending the college. The graduation rates calculated below must be interpreted carefully, as they include students who had no intention of earning a degree from the college. (The college now collects goal information at registration for all credit students; future persistence studies of current students will not have this limitation.)

Over a quarter of the new students entering PGCC in fall 1980 only attended that one semester. Their failure to return does not necessarily mean they discontinued their college studies, as some may have transferred to another college in spring 1981 or subsequently. Forty-two percent of the fall 1980 entrants continued to enroll at PGCC for two or more terms without interruption. (Once they left PGCC, however, they did not come back.) The remaining 31 percent started at PGCC in fall 1980 and attended at least one more term, but had interruptions in their PGCC attendance. Thus nearly a third exhibited "stop-in, stop-out" behavior:

Student Attendance Patterns, Fall 1980 Entrants

Student Attendance Pattern	Number	Percent
Fall 1980 only	1,064	27%
2 to 16 consecutive terms	1,653	42%
Stop-in/stop-out	1,218	31%
Total fall 1980 entrants	3,935	100%

All of the above reflects student attendance patterns over the eight-year study period. If the analysis was extended past spring 1988, it is possible these proportions could change.

A total of 488 of the fall 1980 entrants had earned an A.A. degree from PGCC by the end of the spring 1988 semester. Thus 12.4 percent of the students had earned a degree over the eight-year period. Most of the graduates (319, or 65 percent) had attended PGCC without interruption. Graduation rates for fall 1980 entrants who attended the community college from 2 to 16 consecutive semesters were as follows:

A.A. Degree Achievement
Fall 1980 Entrants Attending PGCC Without Interruption

Consecutive Semesters Attended	Number of Students	Earned A.A. Degree	Percent Graduating
2	676	1	< 1%
3	216	1	< 1%
4	293	75	26%
5	137	57	42%
6	158	82	52%
7	42	19	45%
8	54	31	57%
9	19	13	68%
10	24	18	75%
11	8	4	50%
12	9	7	78%
13	4	4	100%
14	8	5	63%
15	1	1	100%
16	4	1	25%
Total attending consecutively	1,653	319	19%

Forty-two percent of those who attended PGCC for 4 or more consecutive semesters graduated from PGCC with an A.A. degree. Of the 1,218 students whose PGCC careers were interrupted, 169 or 14 percent had received an A.A. degree from PGCC by spring 1988. At least for this cohort, student chances of graduating were better for those able to continue their PGCC studies without interruption.

What other characteristics were associated with A.A. degree attainment? Seventy percent (342) of the graduates had started their PGCC careers in fall 1980 as full-time students. Students starting as full-timers were more than three times as likely to graduate as those starting part-time:

Graduation Rates, Full- and Part-time Students
Entering College in Fall 1980

Status in Fall 80	Number of Students	Earned A.A. Degree	Percent Graduating
Full-time	1,656	342	21%
Part-time	2,279	146	6%
Total	3,935	488	12%

A majority of the graduates completed their program in six or fewer semesters at PGCC. The mode for semesters attended was six:

Number of Semesters Attended at PGCC
PGCC Graduates Beginning College in Fall 1980

Number of Semesters Attended	Number of Graduates	Percent
2	1	< 1%
3	1	< 1%
4	80	16%
5	80	16%
6	105	22%
7	49	10%
8	56	11%
9	25	5%
10	36	7%
11	17	3%
12	16	3%
13	8	2%
14	9	2%
15	4	1%
16	1	< 1%
Total	488	100%

While students starting their college careers full-time in fall 1980 were more likely to graduate than those starting on a part-time basis, less than 20 percent of the 488 graduates had earned their A.A. by the end of 1982. Four-fifths of the graduates took more than two years to earn their "two-year" degrees.

Graduation rates were also calculated by gender and race. Women were more likely to have graduated within the eight-year study period than men. Asian and white students had higher graduation rates than blacks, Hispanics, or native Americans:

Graduation Rates by Gender and Race, Fall 1980 Entrants

	Number of Students	Earned A.A. Degree	Percent Graduating
Female	2,344	329	14%
Male	1,591	159	10%
Asian	121	17	14%
Black	1,451	123	8%
Hispanic	60	4	7%
Nat. American	16	0	0%
White	2,287	344	15%
Total	3,935	488	12%

Nearly one in four of the graduates (113, or 23 percent) had taken at least one developmental studies course. Fall 1980 entrants who had taken developmental courses were somewhat less likely to have graduated than those not taking remedial work:

Graduation Rates by Number of Developmental Courses Taken
Fall 1980 Entrants

Developmental Courses Taken	Number of Students	Earned A.A. Degree	Percent Graduating
None	2,796	375	13%
One	449	53	12%
Two	304	28	9%
Three or more	386	32	8%

Summary

This summary of findings from recent institutional research studies presents a partial picture of student retention at PGCC. The collegewide fall-to-spring retention rate, at 59-60 percent, is difficult to interpret without better information on student goals. Survey data reveal many students who come to the college for only a course or two, perhaps to update job skills or for personal enrichment. Follow-up studies generally find these students satisfied with their community college experience;

their not returning reflects achievement of their educational goals, not any dissatisfaction with the college or their own performance. Furthermore, some attrition is to be expected in an open-admissions college committed to maintenance of academic standards. Fall-to-fall retention rates for PGCC compare favorably with peer colleges.

Many of the same comments apply to the longitudinal student persistence study findings. That only 12.4 percent of the students entering the college in fall 1980 had received an A.A. from PGCC after eight years may largely be explained by student goals. Most students who transfer to four-year schools to earn the baccalaureate do so without completing their community college program. Many other students attend the community college for reasons other than earning a college degree. In a mobile society, in this particularly transient area, people may simply move from the county and continue their education elsewhere. Further study is needed to more fully understand student attendance behavior.

Craig A. Clagett
Director
Institutional Research and Analysis

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